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Believing in Oracles

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Abstract

This paper examines a single consultation of the Delphic oracle by the city of Athens, known from a detailed inscription and references in fragmentary historians. It aims to explore the way in which the processes involved worked to encourage and maintain the belief of Athenians in the power of the gods to intervene in human affairs. The conclusions raise implications for the examination of cognitive aspects of divination more generally.

Keywords: Belief; Delphic oracle; Divination

There are many challenges faced by those who want to use the tools of modern cognitive science to investigate historical religious phenomena, especially ancient historical religious phenomena. The lack of usable data is an obvious example – we have very little quantitative data from the ancient world, and much of the evidence we do have has to be interpreted before it can be used at all. But there is a further problem when it comes to comparative study: can we tell whether we are comparing like with like? There are phenomena where comparative historical study may have great potential, and divination is one such.[1] However, identifying all the elements that made divination function in any particular context can be more difficult than it first appears. In this paper I am taking advantage of the existence of an inscription that gives very precise details of one consultation of the Delphic oracle, and using

[1] This reflection emerges from my involvement in the Research Project *Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience* organised by Esther Eidinow and Armin Geertz (https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/classics/research/projects/caare/intro.aspx). This paper, and all my recent research in ancient religion, has benefited from my involvement with *CAARE* and with Armin and his colleagues at the University of Aarhus.

it to analyse that single example of an act of divination. This will, I hope, help to identify what approaches can be used in the future to explore the role of divination in religion and society.

This is a paper about religious belief or, to be more precise, about one particular religious belief: that in 352 BCE the god Apollo instructed the Athenians not to cultivate an area of land on the edge of their territory. This was a belief widely shared by the Athenians of the time, which had a direct effect on their subsequent actions. The episode that led to the establishing of this belief has been examined quite frequently, but the focus of these examinations has tended to be practical: interest has been in what we can learn about how the Delphic oracle functioned, or how the Athenians treated sacred land (e.g. McDonald 1996; Scafuro 2003; Rhodes & Osborne 2003: 272-281; Bowden 2005: 88-95; Papazarkadas 2011: 244-259). I want to approach the episode from a different angle, and suggest that it can tell us something about religion and cognition, demonstrating some of the ways in which beliefs could be created and sustained in ancient Greece.

The area of land that was at issue in this episode was known as the 'Sacred Orgas'. It was recognised as belonging to the sanctuary of the Two Goddesses, Demeter and Kore, at Eleusis, and it lay on the border between Attica and Megara. Responsibility for maintaining the sanctuary and its property, and for overseeing the religious rituals performed there, lay with the Athenian assembly. The Sacred Orgas had by tradition been left uncultivated, and, more problematically, had no boundary stones marking its extent. In the 350s the Athenians wanted to put part of the land, referred to as the 'edgelands' (*eschatiai*) under cultivation, renting it to raise money to repair parts of the sanctuary buildings. This somehow led to conflict with the Megarians, presumably because some of the land now to be cultivated was considered by the Megarians to be their territory. There was some military activity, and then it was agreed that the exact position of the boundary should be determined, and that it should be marked using inscribed stones (*horoi* or *stelai*). But at the same time the Athenians consulted the Delphic Oracle about whether they should be cultivating the edgelands, and they were told that they should not. We know about this from two sources. One is an inscription recording the decision of the Athenian assembly about how the location of the boundaries of the territory should be determined, and about the process for consulting the Oracle. The other is commentary on the speeches of Demosthenes by Didymus of Alexandria written in the first century BC. Explaining Demosthenes' reference to the 'accursed'

Megarians annexing part of the Orgas (Dem. 13.32), Didymus gives the accounts of two fourth-century historians of Attica, Androtion (c. 410-c. 330) and Philochorus (c. 340-c. 260 BCE), who describe the events. Androtion had been active in Athenian politics for a long time when these events took place. He refers to consultation of the Oracle in these words:

> And the edgelands (*eschatiai*), such as were next to the Orgas, they consecrated after consulting the Oracle and when *the god responded that it was more advantageous and better for them not to cultivate (the edgelands)*. And it was marked off with stone *stelai* in a circle on the motion of Philocrates.[2]

The words that I have italicised are usually passed over without comment, taken to be simply reporting the result of the consultation whose details we know from the inscription.[3] They deserve close attention however, since they add up to a statement of religious belief, as the historian is putting forward a proposition about the action of a supernatural being. Because it is a proposition clearly presented, it must count as a reflective belief, to use the term of Sperber (1997). It might be argued that this is putting too much weight on what is a commonplace – since 'the Greeks' regularly consulted oracles, this is merely a periphrasis for saying that this was an oracular response. I will go on to show why, in this particular case, the matter is a little bit more complicated, but I want to suggest first that such a response is in danger of creating a circular argument, and ignores the question of why the Greeks continued to consult oracles over a long historical period.

There is no doubt that divination, including but not limited to the consultation of oracles, played a large part in ancient Greek public and private life (Johnston 2009). Equally it is clear that consulting the gods was not seen as a trivial matter. Divination through the examination of the entrails of a sacrificed animal was a common practice for private and public divination,

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[2] *BNJ* 324 F30. Italics are mine. Philochorus' account is *BNJ* 328 F155: it is recognised as being dependant on Androtion's, although as recorded by Didymus it includes details not mentioned by the earlier writer (see *BNJ* ad loc.).

[3] Jacoby (1954: 142-143) does not comment on these words, nor does Jones (*BNJ* ad loc.), nor is it mentioned in the most recent commentary on Didymus (Harding 2006).

but it was not treated lightly.[4] Visits to consult oracles could be very powerful emotional experiences. We will examine what happened at Delphi later in this paper, but ancient accounts of consultation at the oracle of Trophonius in Lebadea, for example, depict the process as potentially traumatic (Bonnechere 2003). Furthermore, there was no guarantee that divination would be successful. Xenophon, probably the most useful ancient writer about the practicalities of divination (Bowden 2004), notes more than once that the gods only communicate with those whom they wish to help (*Cyropaedia* 1.6.46; *Hipparchicus* 9.9). It is a commonplace of ancient Greek drama to represent *manteis* (seers or soothsayers) being attacked as frauds or traitors by the powerful rulers who consult them (Flower 2008: 132-152). This representation of *manteis* being held in suspicion, and being disbelieved, goes back to the birth of Greek literature, in the poems of Homer. There was also a shared understanding that even when the gods did communicate through divination, their messages would not be easy to interpret: divination created the risk that human failure to understand the divine might lead to disaster (Kindt 2016). Therefore, although the use of divination has been helpfully examined as a way in which the ancient Greeks managed risk (Eidinow 2007), it was not without risks itself. We do have examples of what happened when the divinatory process apparently failed. Thucydides describes one occasion, when news came to Athens of the destruction of the Athenian expedition to Sicily in 413 BCE, when Athenian belief in divination was severely tested: 'they were angry with the orators who had joined in promoting the expedition, just as if they had not themselves voted it, and were enraged also with the *chresmologoi* (oracle-collectors) and *manteis*, and with whoever had then encouraged them to hope that they should conquer Sicily' (Thucydides 8.1.1). This was a short-term reaction (Parker 2005: 113-114), but it demonstrates that belief in divination could be challenged, and was. This meant that 'belief in oracles' (meaning both the recognition that they were indeed the source of divine communication, and the willingness to put trust in them) was something that needed continually to be reinforced. We can see how this might have happened if we return to the consultation of 352 BCE.

The inscription mentioned earlier (*IG* ii^3 292 = *RO* 58) gives a detailed description of process by which the Athenians consulted the Delphic oracle on this occasion:

[4] See for example the detailed thought-process described by Xenophon in relation to a sacrifice he made (*Anabasis* 6.1.22-4).

[Decided:] that the Secretary of the Council write on two sheets of tin, equal and alike, on the one: *if it is more profitable and better for the people of Athens that the* Basileus *lease out the parts of the Sacred Orgas now under cultivation, the parts outside the boundaries, to pay for the building of the portico and the repair of the sanctuary of the Two Goddesses*; on the other sheet of tin: *if it is more profitable and better for the people of Athens that the parts of the Sacred Orgas now under cultivation, the parts outside the boundaries, be left untilled for the Two Goddesses*; as soon as the secretary has written on it, the President of the *Proedroi* shall take each sheet of tin and wrap it up; having wrapped each in wool, he shall put them into a bronze jug in view of the People;

the *Prytaneis* shall prepare these things, and the treasurers of the Goddess shall bring forward a gold and a silver jug right away to the people, and the president, having shaken the bronze jug, shall take out the sheets of tin each in turn and put the first one into the golden jug and the second into the silver jug and close them up, and the President of the *Prytaneis* shall seal them with the public seal, and whoever of the other Athenians wishes shall add their seal; as soon as they have been sealed, the treasurers shall carry the jugs to the acropolis;

the people shall choose three men, one from the Council and two from all Athenians, who will go to Delphi and ask the God which of the inscriptions the Athenians should act in accordance with concerning the Sacred Orgas, the one from the gold jug or the one from the silver;

as soon as they have returned from the God they shall bring in the jugs and the oracular response and the inscriptions on the sheets of tin shall be read to the people; whichever of the inscriptions the God announces to be more profitable and better for the people of the Athenians, they shall act in accordance with it, in order that matters concerning the Two Goddesses may be as pious as possible, and that never in the time to come may anything impious occur concerning the Sacred Orgas and concerning the other sacred places of Athens.[5]

[5] Translation mine. The *Basileus* was the magistrate responsible for overseeing, amongst other things, matters relating to the sanctuary of the Two Goddesses. The *Proedroi* and

The decree proposes a process characterised by 'the elaboration of ritual and the involvement of a much wider range of officials than the action involved would seem to demand' (Rhodes and Osborne 2003: 281). The inscription describes a sequence of events: first, the initial meeting of the Assembly when the decisions recorded were made; then, presumably, a second meeting of the Assembly, when the inscribed pieces of tin were to be publicly put into the jars and sealed; the visit of the Athenian envoys to Delphi to consult the Oracle; finally the third meeting of the Assembly when the jars were to be reopened and the answer revealed. It will be helpful to examine them in reverse chronological order.

It is, paradoxically, not at Delphi, but in Athens, at the third assembly meeting, that the answer to the real question at issue was revealed. Meetings of the Athenian Assembly were inevitably theatrical events: there was a large audience of several thousand citizens, who watched and listened to the few principal actors (anyone was entited to take part in debate, but it is clear that the vast majority of those who attended never spoke). The scenario described in the inscription reads very much like a scene from a Greek tragedy (not all of which had tragic endings): messengers enter, and bring news from the Delphic Oracle, and at the same time the treasurers carry the gold and silver jars from the acropolis onto the Pnyx, the hill where the Assembly met; the messengers then read out the information as to which jar contains the God's instructions. It is only at this point that the god's will is revealed, and all the assembled Athenians hear it together. This revelation is the climactic event, and we know from the inscription what the god's actual words were: 'it is more profitable and better for the people of Athens that the parts of the Sacred Orgas now under cultivation, the parts outside the boundaries, be left untilled for the Two Goddesses'. Androtion reports these words (slightly abbreviated) as what the god said (rather than as what had been written by the secretary).

Of course we know, and everyone who was present for this event knew, that the form of words had been drafted by the proposer of the decree recorded in the inscription (the first part of the inscription is missing, so we do not know their name). One of the effects of the various procedures that the inscription prescribes is that human words are transformed into divine

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Prytaneis were subgroups of the Council of 500, which was the body that prepared business for the Assembly.

words. That is to say, they gain authority equivalent to that of words actually spoken by the Pythia in the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Indeed from an Athenian perspective their authority is even greater, because there is no possibility that the god's words have been misrecorded or misreported by the envoys sent to consult the Oracle. Part of the explanation for this lies with the notion of theatricality discussed above. In classical Athens, Greek drama was performed within the context of major religious festivals, and most importantly as part of the City Dionysia (Goldhill 1987). That festival combined the celebration of civic virtues with performances of plays which often depicted the gods interacting with human beings, and speaking. Productions were lavish, with the chorus singing and dancing while wearing lavish, and with potentially spectacular stage effects.[6] In comparison, the choreographed revelation of the words of Apollo to the Athenians in 352 BCE will have been lower-key, despite props including gold and silver vases, which were probably quite large. Nonetheless the association between drama, the city and the gods will have had its effect on how the assembly responded to the words read off the pieces of tin drawn from the vases. In tragedies a problematic situation might be resolved by the dramatic appearance of a god, flying onto the stage with the help of elaborate machinery to deliver a decisive speech; in the assembly the resolution of the dilemma facing the citizens was achieved when the divine answer was dramatically drawn from a beautiful glittering vessel. Obviously however, what gave the words their authority was the fact that the Delphic Oracle had been consulted about the matter, and it is to that consultation that we should now turn.

We have plentiful literary evidence about the Delphic Oracle, in particular from the fifth century BCE (in particular in the works of Herodotus and the Attic tragedians) and the early second century CE (e.g. Plutarch, *Oracles at Delphi no Longer Given in Verse*). This allows us to construct with some confidence the basic sequence of the events of a consultation (Fontenrose 1978: 196-228; Bowden 2005: 12-39; Chalupa 2014: 27-30). All the participants (enquirers, priestess, other Delphians) took part in various preliminary rituals, including, for the enquirers, an animal sacrifice. This would, among other things, have worked to emphasise the solemnity of the process. The enquirers would have approached the place where the consultation took place, through the sanctuary, which was filled with rich treasuries

[6] For what is known about Greek theatre in the fourth century, see Wilson 2000, Csapo et al. 2014.

displaying dedications, including much gold and silver.[7] Although there is still some scholarly disagreement, it is now generally accepted that the enquirers spoke directly to the priestess, who replied directly to them, and that her words were entirely comprehensible. Enquirers from cities, like the Athenians in 352, would have written down the response immediately.

Studies of the psychological aspects of the functioning of the Delphic oracle have usually focused on the mental state of the Pythia, the priestess of Apollo who actually gave the responses (e.g. Chalupa 2014). Studies have examined the physical environment of the chamber where she sat, and considered what psychotropic substances she might have had access to (Lehoux 2007). More profitably the mantic session has been examined in comparison to modern examples of 'spirit possession' (Maurizio 1995). For our purposes however it is the mental state of the enquirers which is more important than that of the priestess, and the consultation should be seen as an event that required the active involvement of all the participants.[8]

Once again we are fortunate that we know, more or less, the precise question that the Athenian envoys asked the Oracle. In most cases the question has to be inferred from the responses we have, or is not known.[9] The question was, 'with which of the inscriptions should the Athenians act in accordance concerning the Sacred Orgas, the one from the gold jug or the one from the silver?' We also know that the answer clearly identified one or other jug: there appears to have been no possibility of ambiguity or confusion. We do not know whether the procedure for consultation that the Athenians employed in this case, which effectively ruled out any flexibility in the consultation process, was typical, but there is no

[7] In 352 BCE the sanctuary was not necessarily looking at its best. There had been significant damage from an earthquake in 373, which meant that consultation of the oracle may have taken place in a temporary structure rather than the temple itself. In 356 the sanctuary had been taken over by the a Phocian army, at the start of the so-called Sacred War, which lasted until 346. By then, much of the gold and other precious dedications had been 'borrowed' by the Phocians to pay for the war, but it is likely that little if any of the sanctuaries wealth had disappeared by the time the Athenian envoys arrived (Scott 2014: 148-155).

[8] See the article by Esther Eidinow in this volume.

[9] For a full catalogue of responses see Fontenrose 1978: 240-416.

good reason to suppose that it was not the normal Athenian practice in the fourth century, (Bowden 2005: 92-93) and it may have been developed earlier, and used by other states too.

From an external perspective, this procedure is effectively a very elaborate and expensive way of making a random binary choice, no different from tossing a coin. In this it resembles many other forms of cleromancy, including for example the procedures for consulting the *Yijing*, which developed at more or less the same time (Shaughnessy 2014). Tossing a coin in the twenty-first century is recognised as a leaving the result to chance. Cleromancy on the other hand is aimed at learning the correct answer to a question, even if the mechanism by which this is effected cannot be explained. The process of consulting the Delphic Oracle does however imply a clear narrative of what is happening: the answer to the Athenians' question comes from Apollo. Apollo knows what the Two Goddesses wish should happen to the Sacred Orgas, and he can read what is written on each of the inscriptions within the metal jugs.[10] If this is accepted, then the outcome of the consultation will not be understood as random. Whether that narrative was ever articulated in those terms by anyone involved in the process is not knowable. The basic elements of it, that Apollo, a god, knew what other gods wanted, and could see into a solid metal jug (while still being able to read the piece of solid metal inside it) are the kind of minimally counter-intuitive beliefs that, it has been argued, the human mind naturally adopts about the gods (Boyer 2001).

Only three Athenians were sent to Delphi to ask the question about the gold and silver jugs, and only they will have been influenced directly by the events of the consultation. But Athens regularly sent embassies to consult the oracle, presumably, as in this case, made up of men selected by lot from the citizen body. It is quite likely that when the decision to send the envoys was made, and when they reported back after their visit, many of those present on the Pnyx in Athens will have brought to mind their own experiences of visiting the sanctuary, or stories told to them by friends and relatives who had been there. This shared experience of what it was like to consult the Delphic Oracle will have contributed to the construction of the belief that the response revealed something about Apollo.

[10] Herodotus (147.3), writing some 70 years earlier, includes what purports to be an oracular response from Delphi which begins: 'I know the number of the grains of sand and the dimensions of the sea, and understand the mute and hear the voiceless'.

What I have offered here is a redescription of a sequence of events that took place in ancient Athens and Delphi, that resulted in the widespread holding of a particular belief about the god Apollo. What has this to offer to modern cognitive science of religion, and in particular to the modern investigation of divination? I suggest that two related features of my account are significant here. The first, which may appear obvious, is that trust in the veracity of an oracular response cannot be separated from the nexus of other beliefs (mostly, but not all, non-reflective, or intuitive, in Sperber's terms) about the divine that were shared by the Athenians and throughout the wider Mediterranean world. The second is that these beliefs cannot be understood as purely mental states. Most of the processes I have described are physical, to do with ritual activities, and sensory experiences rather than private rumination.

Forms of divination are still widely practiced around the world (e.g. Peek 1991). In the industrialised west astrology, in more or less debased forms, remains a popular way of enquiring about the future, with over a quarter of Americans claiming to believe in it (Vyse 2014: 19). However, the status of divination as a means of gathering information or seeking guidance is very different in the modern world from what it was in ancient Greece. There it was a universally accepted practice. The rhetoric of suspicion of *manteis* discussed above was not concerned to deny the validity of divination as a practice, but to emphasise that in any particular case there was the possibility of error. The narratives in which these critiques appear, in the poems of Homer, in Attic tragedy and in Herodotus' *Histories*, invariably end up showing that the *manteis* or oracle that was challenged was right all along. The situation in the modern world is almost the opposite. Divination is generally characterised as a form of superstition, and its validity is consistently and thoroughly challenged in the name of 'science' (Vyse 2014). Divination was condemned in the early Christian church (Hegedus 2007), and texts condemning divination are found in the Hebrew Bible (Lev. 19.31, 20.6) and the Koran (5.90), and therefore it finds no support from 'mainstream' religious groups. Forms of divinatory practice, including reading Tarot cards, consulting the *Yijing*, and communicating with angels, are however features of 'New Age' spirituality (Sutcliffe 2014). The location of divination there, clearly identified as 'alternative' to mainstream religious and social organisation, could not therefore be more different from its place in ancient Greek culture.

My account of the process by which the Athenian belief that Apollo had given them an instruction involved significant sensory elements. In particular there was the visual

theatricality of the processes involving the gold, silver and bronze jugs. The preparations made before the approach to the Pythia in Delphi, including the sacrifice of a sheep, will have engaged all the senses. These elements formed part of the larger whole of Greek *polis* religion, a term I am using here to emphasise that there was no neat boundary between religion and politics in Ancient Greece: '*polis* religion' was the set of practices that the city engaged in to maintain good relations with the gods, and that was what was at stake in 352 BCE. It involved processions, sacrifices, music, dance, athletic competitions, dedications of objects, the carrying, washing and dressing of cult statues and other cult objects, and many other rituals. Religion therefore was about far more than mental states: it was experienced through action and through the whole of the body. Modern approaches to religion are increasingly recognising that we need to consider embodied cognition and the role of sensory experience in the interpretation of religion (Day 2004; Deeley 2004). Divination as part of 'New Age spirituality' is an area where the sensory is certainly present, as one reminiscence of the 1960s suggests: 'In our homes we would frequently burn incense and keep little altars with eclectic collections of statues of Indian gods and goddesses, meditating Buddhas, yarrow stalks or coins for consulting the I Ching, and various personal "sacred" objects' (Capra 2002).

Our understanding of divination can undoubtedly be increased through comparative study, and the application of the tools of the cognitive science of religion. In a keynote lecture he gave in 2009, Armin Geertz said 'I am firmly convinced that we need more scholars of religion to participate in the cognitive science of religion. If we don't, then psychologists, anthropologists and neurologists will do it for us. I, for one, am not satisfied with simply ignoring the challenges that the cognitive sciences present to the comparative study of religion' (Geertz 2015: 3). This paper may be read as an answer to that call, from a scholar of religion who can claim no expertise in the cognitive science of religion, but who recognises it as offering the best hope for deepening our understanding of religion, ancient and modern. At 70 years of age, Armin has plenty of time ahead of him in which to lead scholars of religion forward along the road.

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